

What Is Media Literacy?

In Chapter 1 we defined what we mean by *media*, so it might seem that all we have to do now is add a definition of *literacy* and the meaning of the phrase *media literacy* would be clear. But over the years, *media literacy* has been used in multiple ways and has come to mean very different things to different people. It's like the many variations on simple yeast breads: even when the basic ingredients are the same, different bakers can produce vastly different breads.

DEFINING MEDIA LITERACY: A SET OF CAPABILITIES

Over several decades, continents, and academic disciplines, a definition has emerged that characterizes *media literacy* as a set of capabilities applied to media messages and experiences.¹ A frequently cited version in the United States is "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms."² That definition has not always provided clear direction for teachers, however, and it leaves out capabilities that are crucial for successful navigation and communication in today's complicated media world. A more current definition, articulated by media literacy expert Renee Hobbs (2010b), includes capabilities such as comprehension, collaboration, reflection, and social action.

In general, people who exhibit skills and knowledge in the following areas have what we would call *media literacy*:³

- *Access*—Having physical access to up-to-date media technologies and high-quality content and knowing how to use the technologies effectively

- *Understanding*—Comprehending basic, explicit messages from media sources as a precursor to being able to ask analytical questions about those messages
- *Awareness*—Paying attention enough to notice the presence of media messages and their role in one's life
- *Analysis*—Decoding media messages in order to think critically and independently about them
- *Evaluation*—Making informed, reasoned judgments about the value or utility of media messages for specific purposes
- *Creation*—Making media messages for particular purposes and using multiple media formats
- *Reflection*—Contemplating how personal experiences and values influence reactions to and production of media messages and assessing the full range of potential effects of one's production choices on oneself and others
- *Participation*—Initiating or joining in collaborative activities that are enabled by interactive media technologies, such as wikis, social networks, and virtual worlds

In addition to these eight elements, there is a strong assumption that media-literate people will have not only the ability to do these things but also the desire to do them—and then to *act* on what they learn. Inherent to media literacy is the idea that what students learn in class they will translate into real-world action.

Because media literacy is defined as a skill set, it does not function as a traditional content area. As with all subjects, skills are attached to learning content, but media literacy is not a defined body of facts about media that students are expected to master. Like traditional literacy, media literacy provides students with the tools they need to explore content in a wide range of subject areas. That content may sometimes include facts about media, but what we are describing extends well beyond that narrow task.

Despite agreement on the elements of media literacy, disagreements persist about what these terms mean when put into practice. Start with *access*, for example. How would you translate that capability into action? Would your ideas include any of the following?

- A teacher makes sure that every student who passes through his doors knows how to use wikis to work collaboratively.
- Parents concerned with digital-divide issues team up with school staff and civic groups to ensure that every student has home access to a laptop and a high-speed Internet connection.
- A civic club commits to raising funds for the school library to purchase several sets of award-winning bilingual children's books and translations of literature required for high school English courses.
- A high school computer class decides to submit a formal request to the board of education to remove filtering software that is preventing students from using social networks for a class project.

These are only a few of the possible interpretations. So while the above definition of media literacy provides common ground, it does not necessarily produce narrow or uniform practice, nor should it. After all, we are looking at literacy, and like traditional reading and writing, media literacy should be integrated throughout an educational system, not just taught by a single teacher in a single way.

THE FABRIC OF MEDIA LITERACY

In practice, because people enter media literacy education from different paths and perspectives, and with different objectives in mind, media literacy is like the weave of a complex plaid fabric—many intersecting stripes of varying widths and colors sometimes overlap, overshadow, blend, or exist in complementary but parallel worlds. The various interests that lead to media literacy education range from media appreciation (in the tradition of art history or literary criticism) to consumer education⁴ (an outgrowth of a “buyer beware” society in which consumers are expected to know enough to protect themselves) to cultural criticism (which examines the interplay between media and culture to explain how media shape society, especially around social issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, violence, and materialism) to parenting⁵ and religion.⁶ Other threads include vocational education, civic engagement, educational media, and popular culture.⁷ The last is championed by teachers who see media as a way to keep their classes relevant and connected to their students’ lives and the world outside of school. From these varied interests, educators typically combine selected threads to create their own cloth.⁸ Depending on implementation, it is possible to weave any of them into sound media literacy lessons.

CRITICAL AUTONOMY: IDEAL VERSUS REALITY

One of the things that unifies all these interests, at least on paper, is the belief that media literacy should lead to critical consciousness and critical autonomy. That is, students should be able to examine their culture and think independently about it. As the Ontario Ministry of Education (1989, p. 7) summarizes, “Ultimately, media literacy education must aim to produce students who have an understanding of the media that includes a knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, biases and priorities, role and impact, and artistry and artifice,” but “the ultimate aim of media literacy is not simply a better awareness and understanding [of media]; it is critical autonomy.”⁹

The embrace of critical autonomy, however, has not erased other divisions that affect what people think of as media literacy. For example, there are ongoing debates about just how much or which media are appropriate to bring into the classroom. Other tensions involve deeply held beliefs about the nature of children and childhood, who should control the curriculum, and the role of schools in society.